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WOMEN'S CLUBS TO-DAY

BY ALICE AMES WINTER

THE significance of the Women's Club movement of to-day, since it includes a million—close on two million—members, is that it expresses a mass point of view. It is the more meaningful because it is not a class outlook. All the elements that are trying to disrupt the order of society are playing up group against group and class against class; and even the elements that propose to heal America of all her diseases are largely one-idea groups, each with its nostrum. Women's clubs are distinctly all-American in their constituency; ranging geographically from the big city organization with its thousands to the little body of isolated farm women or the ranchers' wives who drive sixty miles across the waste to attend a meeting, and sell one of the cows to get money to go to a convention; ranging intellectually from the Ph.D. to the shut-in woman who, in her middle age, is groping toward "culture"; ranging socially from the wage earner to the anathematized parasitic wife—whom by the way we used to call by the kinder name of lady in those good ancient days when the lure of marriage was voiced in the old song, "You shall neither wash dishes nor yet feed the swine, but sit in an easy chair, sew a fine seam, and live upon strawberries, sugar and cream." There are back eddies and small whirlpools and here and there a spot so dead that it is covered with green scum, but on the whole it is an imposing and steadily moving current. Its body is made up of the ordinary wives and mothers of America, and, because it is inclusive, it is an important factor in making for national consciousness as distinguished from group view-points.

And what *do* women want?

The overwhelming majority of club women were suffragists. They wanted the vote. Having secured it, their major interest is how to use it. One has but to glance over State reports to see that thousands of clubs are giving all or a part of their attention

to the forms or the functions of government, not only of the United States, but of State, city and county, to the study of current theories of municipal administration, to the way that initiative, referendum and recall are working, to the various proposals for change, all the way from reactionary to radical, that are being talked in this very tumultuous world, to questions of social ethics. More than this, hundreds of clubs are applying their study to investigation of their own local conditions in surveys of how their government is working in the administration of police, institutions, fire protection, schools, parks and streets. They are apt to translate their investigation from the theoretic to the concrete and personal as—for a single instance out of many—in that State where every child committed to a public institution for delinquents has a "club mother" who looks out for his particular well-being.

A great change has crept over the attitude toward the home in the past five years, a change that women themselves hardly recognize. The war helped mightily to bring it about. The petty affairs of the household became no longer petty, but matters of public importance. What we ate, drank, wore, how we spent our money or saved it, how we used our leisure hours, most of all how we brought up our babies, all these matters became in a flash no longer our private affairs and nobody else's business, but basal questions of national efficiency. Women saw their homes as the units out of which society was built, and themselves administrators of those homes, as industrial and political factors. Some slipped back into the old point of view when the war pressure was lifted, but large numbers, and chiefly such as are accustomed to organized work, kept the new conception. Home management and work, which was the last of women's occupations to be lifted to dignity, which still remained drudgery rather than labor, now bids fair to become recognized as a major industry.

But the pendulum swings two ways. Everywhere women are not only saying that home affairs are public affairs, but they are also asking if public affairs are not home affairs. They are magnifying home dimensions. Not only what meat shall I give my family, but what, why and how are the packers; not only what is the price of wood, but what is the forest policy of the United

States; not only what shall be the color of the dress, but what is the status of the dye industry. Oftenest of all does one hear the whole outlook of our Government discussed. Why budget the house and not the nation? The first thing in domestic budgeting is to decide on what are the major needs and what the minor wants of the family. In every State and town women are asking similar questions about national expenditure. Why should we spend nine-tenths of our public income on wars, present, past and to come? Why pay our money for the things that destroy life and not for those that upbuild? Why throw thirty millions gaily into a battle ship and haggle for months over two hundred thousand to save the lives of women and children? Does not our whole public attitude need changing to make the great things great and the little things little in the administration of public funds?

Clubs are pushing toward a certain national legislation which they believe will begin the upbuilding from the bottom and help in this readjustment of emphasis in expenditure and in administration. Uniform marriage laws throughout the country are asked. Divorce may be only an ugly symptom of a transitional period during which all outer force ceases to hold, whether of church or of state, and out of which we may in the future achieve a marriage in which personal honor and love shall be the binding powers, but in the meantime, women are asking to have society do all it can to strengthen the ideals. While marriage is the plaything of forty-eight State legislatures, each with its separate standards, it is hard to regard it as either a permanent or a dignified institution. The raising of education and public health to the importance of Cabinet recognition, with adequate financial support, is being asked by clubs everywhere, since the sound mind in the sound body is of primary importance to national efficiency. The home economics bills with their potential assistance to the development of the new home, and the home demonstration work are pushed, and the maternity bill, with a recognition that mothers and babies have as great a claim on public protection as hogs and sheep. Citizenship of married women independent of that of their husbands is a wide spread demand.

We hear of the millions of young women in industries. But

there are also millions of older women who have been in factories and stores and have later gone into home-making duties. Many of these are club women. This accounts for the fact that clubs have always been in close sympathy with legislation for the protection of industrial groups, not only on account of personal relations, but also because of a realization that it is a matter of importance to the race that young women should have unstunted bodies and unwarped minds.

One of the marked phenomena of the last year or two is the awakening of the rural and small town woman to club organization and activity. The importance of her home occupation has reached her and lifted her in her own eyes and in return she is contributing to the larger world. Figures are not all at hand, but in one mid-western State one hundred and ninety new rural clubs have been added this year, and practically all of these are studying civics and government. Another reports eleven thousand new rural members in its organization. Thirty-seven States have club committees working for home demonstration agents. Here is a single instance of how it works. Last summer the extension work of a certain State in home economics was threatened. The chief writes, "For the first time since I have known the State, rural women—women from the isolated open spaces—came to town with their bags packed, ready to go to the State capitol and personally discuss with their legislators the question of disturbing a work that means so much to them. And that's what the club has done for them. Bringing them into contact with women who had already attained civic consciousness has given them a belief in themselves and a desire to exercise their rights as citizens." Needless to say, the work was saved.

County rural life clubs to bring isolated women together to study their own problems, either as related to the cost and selling price of farm products, or as they touch the children's school life, or the more spiritual influences of the household, are the response to this rapid development.

Originally clubs came into being simply as self culture organizations. The inevitable happened. As soon as the women got together they began to discuss their local conditions and needs. They forgot Browning for a few moments and talked about a rest

room for the farmers' wives who came to town, or the need for a hospital. Or they enjoyed the books they had bought so much that someone proposed a little library for the town, and soon the bookcase became a room and then a building was needed. A recent report from a survey in one of the larger States says that ninety per cent of the libraries of that State were originally founded by women's clubs and mothered until it became possible to ask for an appropriation and turn them over to public authorities. A western State similarly reports that all but eight of its libraries were thus brought into being. In every State there are club scholarship loans, and hundreds of young women owe their normal or college education to these revolving funds. Or, in some cases, clubs on the trail of the moving picture atrocities began the agitation for censorship, or even found it best to open and run a movie house themselves—and made money at it.

While thousands of clubs are studying the mechanism of government, many are relating music to their own community life, not as a remote and difficult subject for trained specialists, but as an integral part of the daily well being. One notes a mining town of 5,000 where the club has brought together people of all races to give, for their own benefit, operas like *Aida*, *La Traviata*, *Rigoletto*, and where the results on community understanding are more truly "Americanization" than many movements that dignify themselves by that name.

Many have swung their interest in the literature of the immigrant into an effort toward real understanding of the actual alien woman and her children, a wide spread movement that has its stories of human contact all the way from the little town among the mountains of Colorado to the heart of New York. Culture means to them just what it means in agriculture—a preparation of the soil for greater fertility. The meaning of to-day's currents, the relation between them and the individual life, the expression of them in music, art and literature, these are the elements of the study club of to-day, linking it directly with the active working club in a General Federation.

Alice Ames Winter.